

## Irving Kristol's gone – we'll miss his clear vision

Irwin Stelzer pays tribute to the humanity and intelligence of the godfather of neoconservatism.

By Irwin Stelzer

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We buried Irving Kristol today, and now must cope with the fact that we, and others who had never been fortunate enough to know him, live in a world devoid of his wisdom, kindness, humour, and plain common sense. Irving was 89 years old, the son of Jewish immigrants. He rose from a day labourer in Brooklyn to become perhaps the most consequential public intellectual of the latter half of the 20th century.

Irving is best known as the godfather of neoconservatism, although his persuasive tools were not those of Tony Soprano or Marlon Brando's Godfather-figures, but contained in his essays, talks, columns and what he called his "small magazines" such as *The Public Interest*. That journal never had more than 12,000 subscribers, but what subscribers! *The Public Interest* had such a profound effect on public policy because it applied the best knowledge of all the social sciences, as understood by scholars and intellectuals on all sides of most debates, and, in Irving's view, because footnotes were forbidden.

Any doubts about the influence of Kristol and his magazines should have disappeared when President Ronald Reagan joked at a dinner that anyone wanting a job in his new administration should call the White House and say: "Irving sent me." No further vetting would be required. Or when President George W Bush conferred on Irving the Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honour.

Kristol regaled us with tales of his undergraduate days as an anti-Stalin Trotskyite, a cell so small that it could have met in a phone booth, according to his co-Trotskyite wife; of his support for liberal Democrats in the days when those Democrats such as Henry "Scoop" Jackson believed in a strong military and refused to bow to the pressure of the Soviet Union; and his final conversion to what came to be called neoconservatism, a name invented by a socialist critic of Irving's views. Kristol's explanation, that a conservative is a liberal who has been mugged by reality, might well apply to those British voters who supported New Labour but have been mugged by the reality of rising crime, unassimilated immigration, the decline of the family, soaring deficits and taxes, and the other excesses of the welfare state.

As I tried to report in my collection of neoconservative essays, Irving never regarded neoconservatism as a movement – there never has been a meeting of neoconservatives, he liked to say. Neoconservatism, he said, is a tendency. I would call it a style of thought, one part empiricism, one part common sense, one part old-fashioned good humour when confronting opponents. And several parts plain kindness: I have received more than one communication from now-mature scholars who recollect how kind Irving had

been to them when "I was just a junior researcher". My wife Cita recalls that when she was not as grand as the other guests at a New York dinner party – attended by the governor of the state, media moguls, Wall Street movers and shakers and the like – Irving nevertheless spent most of the evening chatting with her, exploring her interests, and determining whether he could further her career in some way.

On the policy level, it was Kristol who urged Reagan to make his peace with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. To counter the liberal offers of more and more entitlements, he suggested that conservatives offer voters more and more of their own money – tax cuts. And he persuaded Republicans, traditionally fixated on balancing budgets, that some tax cuts could actually increase the flow of revenues by encouraging hard work and risk-taking.

It was Kristol, too, who realised an important fact that underlies much of David Cameron's thinking: culture affects economic performance. The family must be preserved, as it is the source of the stability that permits people to look to the future, save and invest. Crime must not be condoned, lest society unravels. Welfare that induces dependence is a disservice to the recipients, even if those who make it available feel good. And capitalism must produce results that are fair and seen to be fair, and be adapted to changing circumstances, which is why he never gave more than Two Cheers for Capitalism (the title of one of his books). To the end of his days, Kristol followed the British press, and worried about the future of the country in which he had lived after the Second World War, and much admired.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that Irving is not the only influential Kristol. His wife, the Victorian historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, argues for Victorian virtues of community, help for the deserving poor, and a willingness to rely on shame to govern individual behaviour, prompting Prime Minister Gordon Brown to become an unabashed fan, even contributing an introductory essay to her book on the British, French and American Enlightenments. This worries Brown's Left wing, but anyone who knows the Prime Minister understands how Himmelfarb's extolling of Victorian morality appeals to his better angels.

Irving Kristol is gone. We will miss him, those whose lives were enriched by association with him, and the far greater number who benefited from his influence on economic and social policy, both in my country and in yours.



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